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**PREFERENCES OF CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING MATHEMATICS EXPRESSED BY  
STUDENTS IN RURAL SECONDARY SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS OF ZIMBABWE**  
**Zakaria Ndemo, Dr. David J. Mtetwa,**

**VYGOTSKY'S CO-CONSTRUCTION PRINCIPLES: BRIGHT CHILDREN AS TEACHERS:  
IN ZIMBABWEAN INFANT SCHOOL**  
**Roswitta Gatsi and Professor Chipo Dyanda**

**AN ASSESSMENT OF TEACHERS' CONCERNS, TEACHERS' LEVELS OF USE AND  
THE SUPPORT THEY ARE GIVEN IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PRIMARY  
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE CURRICULUM IN ZIMBABWE:  
A CASE STUDY OF SHURUGWI DISTRICT**  
**Saiden Tondhlana**

**TRADITIONAL MEDICINE AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN  
THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN ZIMBABWE?**  
**T. C. Kazembe**

**THE USE OF SHONA AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN THE FIRST THREE  
GRADES OF PRIMARY SCHOOL IN A TONGA SPEAKING COMMUNITY:  
PARENTS' AND TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS**  
**Ruth Gora, George Mavunga, Bertha Muringani, Febion Waniwa,**

**EXPLORING FACTORS AFFECTING PERFORMANCE OF BACHELOR OF  
EDUCATION (EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION, PLANNING AND POLICY STUDIES)  
STUDENTS IN EDUCATIONAL STATISTICS:  
A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY, MASHONALAND WEST REGION**  
**Emmanuel Chinamasa**

**CHANGING THE FACE OF TEACHING: A CASE FOR REFLECTIVE TEACHING**  
**Webster Kadodo**

**THEORISING PRACTICE AND PRACTISING THEORY IN UNIVERSITY THEATRE  
DESIGN COURSES: THE CASE OF TWO ZIMBABWEAN STATE UNIVERSITIES**  
**Nehemiah Chivandikwa**

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## CHANGING THE FACE OF TEACHING: A CASE FOR REFLECTIVE TEACHING.

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### ABSTRACT

*The article examines the value of reflective processes in teaching. The main argument in the paper is that unless teaching is carried out through reflective processes, there is the danger of sticking to outdated practices that may no longer be very productive. This research argues that educators need to reflect-on-action (think about action) and reflect-in-action (think during action) in order to bring about reflection-for-action (think for future action; Killion and Todnem, 1991). Teachers need to examine their plans to determine what is likely to work in their classes. Reflective processes can be encouraged through collaborations amongst teachers as well as between teachers and their learners. The article also argues that reflective teaching helps to free the classroom space allowing the teacher to work with learners in more fruitful relationships. In this way, learners' contributions would be treated positively and not with suspicion. Reflective processes in education need to be encouraged through action research to allow educators to have a second look at issues. The process allows them to refocus their practice in relation to environmental situations for given settings.*

### Introduction

The concept of reflective teaching derives from an observation that the learning-teaching discourse is, and ought to always be, characterised by thinking processes. As observed by Chilisa and Preece (2005: 194), these are processes of enquiry where practitioners solve their own practice-based problems. The process is characterised by "doing, reflecting on the action, drawing conclusions, and then reflecting again on the doing." Russell at <http://educ.queensu.ca/~russell> refers to this process as action research and is seen as offering alternatives to teachers who have been encouraged to look to others, rather than to themselves and their students for ways to improve their teaching. In Dewey's words (1933:12), "reflective thinking, in distinction from other operations to which we apply the name of thought, involves a state of doubt, hesitation, an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt and dispose of the perplexity." Being reflective, thus, is an important human activity in which people "recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it" (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985:19). The capacity to reflect develops to different stages in different people, and it is this ability that characterises those who learn effectively from

experience. All lessons, to use Ryle's expression (in Fisher, 1990: vi), "should be lessons in thinking."

The tradition of education has seen various teaching methods evolving. Some such methods owe their existence to different philosophies. With time, some of these methods have been revised and others thrown out. To date we have not been able to come up with an all-time teaching method. This has been so because the learning-teaching environment has never been static. Findings from Psychology, and other related fields, have led to continuous reforms in the various teaching methods. In my opinion, the teacher seems to be the variable that has remained almost constant (though with its own modifications). As such, modern thinking has shown that there is need to develop alternatives that will ensure that teachers, and their teaching, remain relevant to the new perspectives in education. Reflective thinking, which others see as action research, has thus, become a significant component of teaching in the contemporary world. Commenting on action research, Bencze (2005) at Research Help.html" [http://leo.oise.utoronto.ca/~bencze/Action\\_Research\\_Help.html](http://leo.oise.utoronto.ca/~bencze/Action_Research_Help.html) says that a special feature setting action research apart from other forms of research is that research is conducted at the same time as action is being taken to improve the teaching practice. Consequently, research findings are spontaneous and unique. In other words, because research is conducted as changes are being implemented, new, unforeseen perspectives emerge as the action research proceeds. It is my contention in this paper that the quality of the teacher is central to any learning-teaching exchange because it heavily impacts on, and influences almost all that goes on in a learning discourse, hence, the need for research and reflectivity.

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### **Reflectivity in teaching**

As already stated above, the concept of being reflective derives from action research, a term generally attributed to Kurt Lewin, a German social psychologist who worked in USA in the 1930s and 1940s. Lewin had sought to develop a research methodology based on peoples' real-world experiences (Hendricks, 2006; McDonough and McDonough, 1997). In the idea of reflection in teaching,

...the unique and the particular are best dealt with by converting a professional's tacit knowing-in-action, so that when someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context (McDonough & McDonough, 1997:23).

This is an amalgamation where 'doing' and 'thinking' become interwoven into a unit. Reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action allow for the development of a critical evaluation of the interacting and interlocking activities involved in a learning-teaching environment. Reflection is the basis for research. It allows us

to delve into philosophical enquiries. Such processes allow the teacher to zero in on aspects that he or she may have taken for granted before. To quote Pollard (1996: 6),

*A practitioner's reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning. Through reflection, he can surface and criticize the understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience.*

The practice of reflection-in-action becomes a source of renewal for a practicing teacher (Elliot, in Schon, 1983). Teachers, in this case, would be able to "think on their feet as instruction goes forward and to respond to the special features of their instructional settings" (Schon, in Armstrong and Savage, 1998: 70). Such reflections may arise from diverse situations in a practitioner's life. Occasions of relative tranquillity of a post-mortem, a process of looking back on a project one may have undertaken, a situation one may have lived through, or even the spontaneous reflection that is born out of unfolding issues, all help to explore possibilities and understandings which will all be brought to bear on how practitioners will manage learning-teaching situations. This could be in a mood of idle speculation or deliberate effort that could be before, during or after an occurrence. In other words, teachers need to think about what they do so that they can identify what worked well and what did not. Such practice is the recipe that improves the on-going or future lessons.

Reflection, thus, allows the teacher to see more detail and possible corrections and this creates a basis upon which alterations, revision and refocusing can be made leading to best possible results. Reflection, therefore,

*...emancipates us from merely impulsive and routine activity...enables us to direct our actions with foresight and to plan according to end in view of purposes of which we are aware. It enables us to know what we are about when we act (Dewey, 1933:17).*

In other words, craft knowledge is not sufficient on its own but rather, such skills and techniques brought out should be complemented with insightful judgment. The wonderment and curiosity that arises from a reflective analysis of the learner, the environment, the materials, the learning aids, and even the methods used (or to be used) may lead to an informed teaching plan that brings forth bountiful ventures in the learning-teaching landscape.

One can think reflectively only when one is willing to endure suspense and

undergo the trouble of searching (Pollard, 1996). As noted by Fisher (1990: xiii),

It is one thing to have heard and read something that is merely to take notice; it is another thing to understand what we have heard and read, that is to ponder.

In using the reflective model, knowledge becomes experiential rather than received, leading to, among other things, critical evaluation of techniques in context and the reciprocity of received knowledge and classroom experiences (Wallace, 1991). Action research by teachers becomes,

...a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out (Carr and Kemmis, 1986:162).

Reflective teaching is an orientation to instruction that calls on teachers to reflect thoughtfully on the conditions at hand and to vary their teaching procedures so as best to serve the needs of learners who are the clientele of education. Reflective teaching is, thus, participant-driven, collaborative, context-specific and leads to change and the improvement of practice, and not just knowledge for itself.

McDonough and McDonough (1997:25) identify some critical advantages of research-in-practice and say that it

- begins with and builds on the knowledge that teachers have already accumulated;
- focuses on the immediate concerns of classroom teachers;
- matches the subtle organic process of classroom life;
- builds on the 'natural' processes of evaluation and research which teachers carry out daily;
- bridges the gap between understanding and action by merging the role of researcher and practitioner;
- sharpens teachers' critical awareness through observation, recording and analysis of classroom events;
- helps teachers better articulate teaching and learning processes;
- bridges the gap between theory and practice.

### How can reflectivity be encouraged in practitioners?

For teachers to achieve these reflective skills, they need to develop commitment to systematic questioning of their teaching, a concern to question and test theory in practice, as well as a readiness to allow others to observe one's work and discuss it with them on an open and honest basis. In short, practitioners need to

- examine closely their practice for new possibilities that may further learning;
- identify the gap between theory and practice with a view to closing that gap for learners to comprehend;
- make critical observations of classroom activities to ensure learners develop critical thinking skills;
- justify class activities as directed at developing critical thinkers and problem-solvers;
- show how selected methods are critical in transforming learners;
- collaborate with other practitioners to see other possible windows to extend learning;
- avoid taking learners' contributions for granted;
- justify evaluation procedures to ensure they transform learners into problem-solvers than merely regurgitating other peoples' ideas.

Such teachers would necessarily develop an ability to handle polarities and reconcile them satisfactorily during a given learning-teaching exchange. Such polarities can be amicably resolved.

learner ←.....→ teacher  
[i.e. resolve the teacher-student contradiction so that both "are simultaneously teachers and students" (Freire, 1972:46) liberating learning leading to exchange of knowledge through interaction rather than transmission. The environment must be permissive and enabling for transfer of knowledge to take place]

flexibility ←.....→ planning  
[i.e. being flexible rather than being rigid to allow alterations once advantages in such are envisaged]

disaster ←.....→ stability  
[i.e. to resourcefully overcome 'disasters' when they unexpectedly arise during learning discourse]

laughter ←.....→ seriousness  
[i.e. we enjoyed ourselves but they did serious work so that the mood and environment promote transfer of knowledge]

unpredictability ← ..... → routine  
 [i.e. ability to handle the unexpected without being awed or shocked which puts the teacher out of stride]

enjoying ← ..... → grind  
 [i.e. satisfying and enjoyable but hard work always being guaranteed].

[Adapted from Pollard, 1996]

These polarities become occasions through which the learning-teaching continuum is extended. A reflective teacher need not feel put off-stride by such developments when they occur in a learning transaction. Such occurrences should be treated as occasions to extend learning rather than being thought of as potential threats to the status of the teacher.

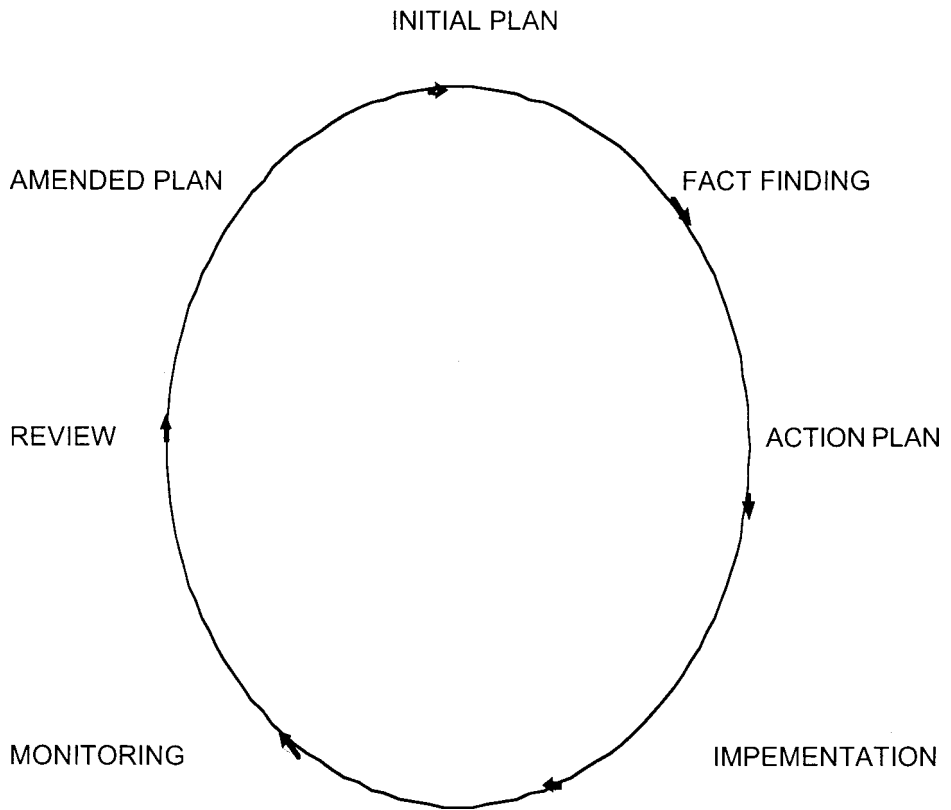
### **The reflective cycles**

The use of the reflective teacher model leads to production of critical thinkers who can problem-solve through reflection to provide well thought out and calculated solutions. These said qualities need not remain a preserve of the teachers only, but rather should rub into the very products of such effort. The proposed reflective teacher would, and should indeed, act as the important others whose influence, with time, creates reflective qualities in the learners. Through the reflective process, both teachers and learners would sufficiently develop creative thinking to appreciate the value of looking "afresh at what we usually take for granted" (Fisher, 1990: xi). If not encouraged at an early age, children may stop speculating and playing with ideas. Creativity largely consists of rearranging what we know in order to find out what we do not know. This underlines the significance of reflective abilities to help us see the connections between and amongst issues.



The reflective process is shown using the reflective cycle below.

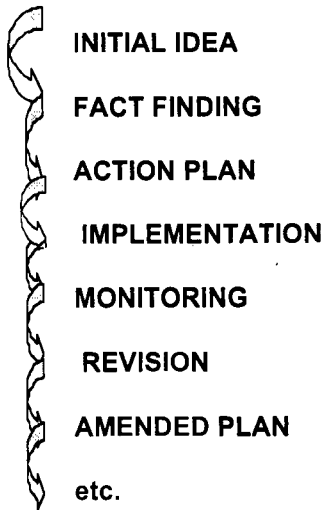
**Self-Reflective Cycle**



(Adapted from McDonough and McDonough, 1997)

The same Self-Reflective model can be shown in the form of a spiral as shown below.

### **Self-Reflective Spiral**

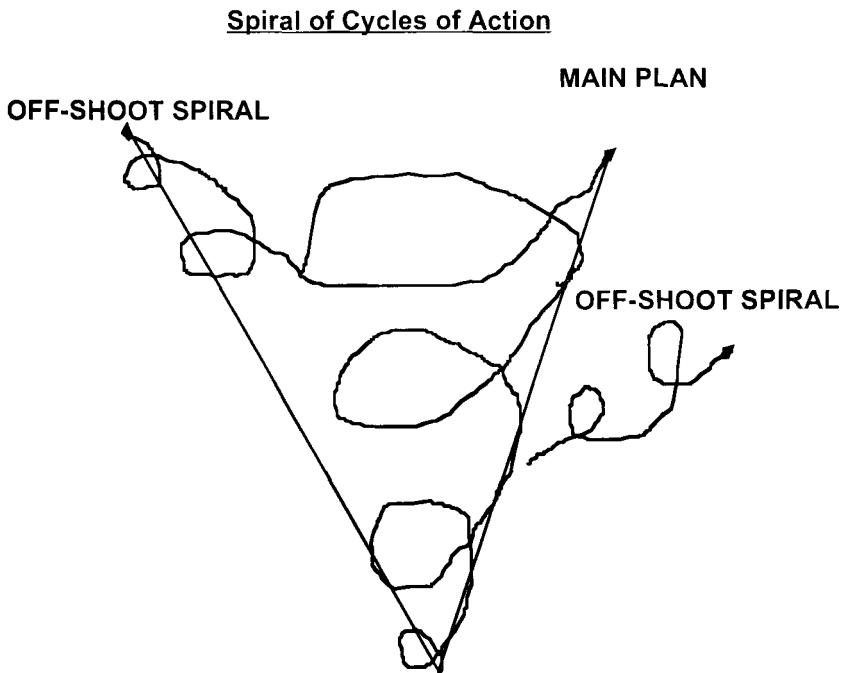


The Reflective Cycle provides an on-going evaluation and monitoring processes to keep teaching plans updated and refocused. The cycle starts with an Initial Plan subjected to reflection leading to Fact Finding in order to operationalise the plan into an Action Plan. Once the practitioner is satisfied with the plan, it is implemented through the scrutiny of a reflective eagle's eye to ensure an objective monitoring of the process. Within the same breadth, the plan is subjected to various forms of evaluation procedures to identify points of strength (on which to build on for future plans) and weaknesses (for immediate and long term amendments). The review of the plan, therefore, should not be viewed as a summative process but rather as formative (on-going). Review and amendments are ongoing to allow immediate refocusing of teaching where such alterations are desirable and possible during the course of a lesson. The Amended Plan provides a platform for a new Initial Plan.

The whole process of planning and implementation should be subjected to reflection in an attempt to ensure relevance of the teaching plan. However, the Reflective Cycle, as proposed by McDonough and McDonough (1997), has a weakness in that, instead of acknowledging and pursuing new plans in the form of off-shoots, the preoccupation seems to be on improving the same plan(s) through revision. As a result, it becomes more productive to see this process as spiral(s) of cycles of action as proposed by McNiff (1993).

According to McNiff (1993:30), teachers need to move beyond the simple cycle and spiral zones to work towards “a situation of recursively improving practice,” a situation he calls ‘a cycle of cycles.’ In this process, an individual cycle of identification of problem-imagination of solution-implementation of the solution-evaluation of solution-modification of practice may be taken as the germ of a system that generates an unlimited number of cycles that operate in a similar fashion (McNiff, 1993:30).

This is shown in the diagram below.



(Adopted from McNiff, 1993: 30)

In this spiral of cycles, the funnel needs not remain the same but should open with time as knowledge widens. Off-shoot spirals in the diagram above indicate the new problems and opportunities that continuously evolve from the ever-examined and modified plans.

Main plans, therefore, ought to provide with off-shoot spirals and secondary plans that will expand our knowledge in the area we would be examining. The activity enriches the teacher since there are multiple ideas and opportunities in the area examined. This, in essence, would qualitatively improve the practicing teacher, and may correspondingly improve the quality of teaching that goes on

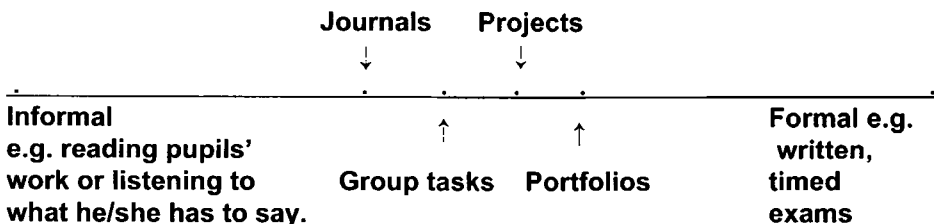
in our educational institutions. This approach should be harmonised with assessment procedures employed by practitioners.

### **Reflections on assessment procedures**

Reflective teaching, as has been argued, is a process of scrutinising and re-examining educational practices to ensure teaching remains relevant and useful in the ever-changing environment. Educational practices can remain relevant by subjecting them to rigorous processes to ensure they (still) serve a purpose rather than simply being more of 'we used to do it that way ever since.' As much as reflective teaching scrutinises the teaching-learning continuum, the learning-assessment continuum also needs to be relevant to promote critical teaching and learning leading to critical thinking and problem-solving skills in learners. Assessment must therefore, be used as "a continuous part of the teaching-learning process, involving pupils whenever possible, as well as teachers in identifying next steps" (Pollard, 1996:264). Assessment procedures, thus, need to be flexible and relevant for the twenty-first century educational goals and objectives. It should be noted that "good assessment practice is not cheap, and needs to be constantly defended when the resource base is continually under threat" (Toohey, 1999:180).

Assessment procedures must take into account the whole range of the assessment continuum rather than be limited to the traditional, but most preferred formal tests and examinations. Assessment should be used as "a continuous part of the teaching-learning process, involving pupils, wherever possible" (Pollard, 1996: 265).

### **Assessment Continuum**



The assessment continuum above indicates the need for teachers to take into account, assessment in its full breadth ranging from the most informal to the most formal ways. Of importance is the fact that the teacher needs to reflect on each of these and see how each could be employed to extend learning. This approach has the capacity to rope in teachers' beliefs and match assessment with local situations. If teachers' own assessments do not play a part, the

summative forms will overrule and marginalise teachers' formative assessments unless the link between the two is carefully structured (Pollard, 1996).

However, it is equally important to take note of the public's beliefs on assessment procedures. The question is whether the public can understand that new models of learning show that traditional assessment systems are inadequate and at times damaging. Work in this field shows that training pupils in the atomised items of traditional external tests is inimical to their effective learning. The backwash effects of narrow testing are damaging (Gifford and O'Connor, 1992). Herein lies the problem of teaching for examinations. Assessment ought to be more than testing. It should be an integral part of teaching and learning. Through assessment, teachers learn about their students, about themselves as teachers, and about the impact of the instructional programme (Tompkins and Hoskisson, 1995). The public's beliefs on assessment, therefore, need to be taken into account. Traditional beliefs need to be transformed through collaborative relationships between educators and parents. The relationships could be in the form of joint homework monitoring. Teachers and parents could collaborate in monitoring progress. Portfolios could be shared amongst teachers, parents and learners.

Authentic assessment practices reflect a view of instruction that is more sensitive to the concept of performance assessment. In this view,

*...assessment becomes an integral part of instruction, is ongoing and is based on process as well as product. It acknowledges the fact that teachers are in a position to constantly observe and, thus, assess students in action, engaged in a wide range of behaviours (Hurley & Tinajero, 2001: 33).*

For authentic assessment to succeed, there is need to develop a teacher with an aptitude for his or her work. Teacher training institutes should embark on rigorous selection of trainee teachers who have a genuine calling to the profession of teaching. The most important implication, therefore, is that teachers must be critical thinkers. They must be knowledgeable and well-informed individuals who can ask critical questions and determine ways to find answers to them and then make wise instructional decisions for each child. Indeed the teachers would need to have the requisite reflective and action research skills that allow them to reflect on, and take in the same breadth, teaching, learning and assessment.

### **Research methodology**

Qualitative data were collected using face-to-face interviews, lesson observations and document analyses. As observed by Marshall and Rossman (2006: 2), "qualitative research is pragmatic, interpretive and grounded in lived experiences

of people.” It can therefore, answer descriptive, explanatory and causal questions (Eisenhart, 2006) relating to teachers’ behaviour and actions in class.

The credibility of findings was established through “triangulation, a process in which multiple forms of data are collected and analyzed” (Hendricks, 2006: 71). This helped the researcher to establish recurrent behaviours or actions, thus, clarifying issues at hand.

### **Research participants**

In total, six participants took part in this research. One Great Zimbabwe University lecturer in the Department of Curriculum Studies took part. The lecturer teaches Graduate Certificate in Education (Grad. C.E.) and follows up students for teaching practice supervision. Two Masvingo Teachers’ College lecturers who act as link persons in the teaching of Action Research also took part. In total, three student teachers (two Graduate Certificate in Education – GZU, and one Diploma in Education – Masvingo Teachers’ College), took part. Initially diploma students were two but one was lost through attrition.

### **Data Collection methods**

Three face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the three lecturers. Six lesson observations were carried out with the two Grad. C.E. students. Each observation was followed by a review discussion. A colleague in the department assisted in the discussions. There were also three group discussions involving the three student teachers. Three sets of documents for the three student teachers were analysed. In all cases, field notes and tape recordings were used to preserve data.

### **Results**

Once the various data were collected analysis was done. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 64) say that, “analysis involves taking data apart, conceptualizing it, and developing ...concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions in order to determine what the parts tell us about the whole.” In view of this, various analytic tools were used to probe the data, stimulate conceptual thinking, increase sensitivity, provoking alternative interpretations of data and generating the free-flow of ideas.

Analyses of transcript on interviews revealed that beliefs about teachers at Masvingo Teachers’ College were that they should be empowered and liberated to deal with various classroom demands. Action research/reflective practice was seen to be able to move teacher training in that direction. This observation agrees with Child Development Study (CDS) format observed. CDS at Masvingo Teachers’ College is Action research based, taking the form of recursive cycles.

However, a negative case (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), was observed from the teachers' college student during group discussions. The student remarked,

Action research does help especially when we are doing CDS, but It's not easy in a classroom situation. Nyaya dzamacycles kana wava muclassroom sometimes zvinoramba kubatana. (Issues concerning cycles when in classrooms sometimes do not jell.)

This negative case is significant in showing the complexities involved in training teachers to be reflective in their teaching.

Analyses of Grad. C.E. students' lesson evaluations revealed that most lesson evaluations were routinised. For instance, the weaknesses noted in lesson delivery and students' comprehension were not used reflectively to plan remediation or for future lesson plans. In-vivo codes generated from participants are quite revealing of the changes that took place following post-mortem lesson discussions. Corbin and Strauss (2008) say that in-vivo codes act as validating tools. In Chiovitti and Piran's (2003) criteria for achieving rigour in ground theory research, they say that there is need to use participants' actual words to show their meanings or understanding of the phenomenon. The following are evident that lesson review sessions helped the student teachers to appreciate the value of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action.

Your insistence that I should reflect on my lesson evaluation to plan for remediation and future lessons really helped. In the past, I just treated evaluation as routine necessary for lecturers to see when they came to supervise my lesson. You should see what is happening in schools, most teachers simply do that for the head and EOs. [Part of participant C J's transcription].

Before our discussion, I used to get frightened. In fact, I hated students who paused questions especially when lecturers were observing my lessons. I suspected they were out to embarrass me or expose my shortcomings. When you encouraged me to allow learners to pause their questions and then involve them as a group to negotiate answers, that sort of calmed my nerves. I am really beginning to appreciate the essence of reflecting on activities because it gives you direction and different ways of seeing things. [Part of participant M G's transcription].

The researcher's experiences as a classroom practitioner in secondary schools also testify to the value that can be accrued from reflecting from reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action to arrive at reflection-for-action. Corbin and Strauss (2008: 80) say that in drawing upon personal experiences, "we want to use our

experiences to bring up other possibilities of meaning.” The following vignette evidently makes a case for reflective processes in classroom practice:

One afternoon in 1994, I had a literature lesson with my Form 4A1 during the lunch hour. In such sessions, I allowed my students to take their lunch whilst we discussed our literature issues. Two friends, Pesline and Lister shared a table. Pesline remarked, “Gosh, I forgot my lunch box home!” Lister answered, “Don’t worry, we can share what I brought.” Lister proceeded to share the contents of her lunch box into two portions and pushed one portion to Pesline who remarked, “Is this what you call lunch!” The whole class laughed. Lister had brought samp for her lunch. It was evident from Lister’s non-verbal reaction that she was hurt. When I reflected on the incident at the spur of the moment (I did not know then that I was reflecting-in-action), I decided to make a detour and discuss registers using that incident. We achieved two things from that discussion. The first was that learners appreciated that registers are a day-to-day occurrence in our communities. As such, they could practice their register questions (‘O’ Level Paper 2, section B register questions) by merely listening to how people use language in their own community. We even went on to compile interesting incidences that we used to practice registers on. The second thing achieved was that we served the friendship that was heading for collapse. [Vignette from the researcher’s previous classroom experiences.]

From that incident this researcher learnt that, as teachers we need to be attentive to what happens in our classrooms, and be reflective to exploit such moments to extend our students’ learning.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be noted that being reflective leads to teacher improvement and empowerment. Reflectivity improves practice by way of sound judgment on methods and classroom procedures, as much as it leads to improved and focused assessment. The sum-total of this is dynamic classroom activities whose aim is to develop critical thinkers. The Reflective Teacher Model should not be viewed as a method, but needs to be acknowledged as a critical quality that has a capacity to focus and align learning-teaching activities based on environmental conditions for given activities. Teacher training institutes should thus, be charged with the responsibility to ensure that teachers sufficiently develop reflective skills through, among other ways, action research.



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